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Moore, Susan; Trudeau, Dan

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Editorial

New Urbanism: From Exception to Norm—The Evolution of a Global Movement

Susan Moore ^{1,*} and Dan Trudeau ²

¹ Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, London, WC1H 0NN, UK; E-Mail: susan.moore@ucl.ac.uk

² Geography Department, Macalester College, Saint Paul, MN 55105, USA; E-Mail: trudeau@macalester.edu

* Corresponding author

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Abstract

This thematic issue explores the evolution of the New Urbanism, a normative planning and urban design movement that has contributed to development throughout the world. Against a dominant narrative that frames the movement as a straightforward application of principles that has yielded many versions of the same idea, this issue instead proposes an examination of New Urbanism as heterogeneous in practice, shaped through multiple contingent factors that spell variegated translations of core principles. The contributing authors investigate how variegated forms of New Urbanism emerge, interrogate why place-based contingencies lead to differentiation in practice, and explain why the movement continues to be represented as a universal phenomenon despite such on-the-ground complexities. Together, the articles in this thematic issue offer a powerful rebuttal to the idea that our understanding of the New Urbanism is somehow complete and provide original ideas and frameworks with which to reassess the movement's complexity and understand its ongoing impact.

Keywords

built environment; heterogeneity; new urbanism; normative planning

Issue

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1. Introduction

The New Urbanism began as a normative planning movement in the USA in the 1980s to respond to suburban sprawl and offer a new paradigm for development, especially in suburban contexts. In fewer than 40 years, New Urbanism has moved from the fringe to the centre, its influence evident in projects on every settled continent. With this global reach has come differentiation. New Urbanism in 2020 is decidedly heterogeneous, produced through complex, contingent, and partial translations of the principles of the movement into specific contexts via a variety of built forms and governance models. Yet, despite this heterogeneity, New Urbanism sustains itself as a universal movement, aided in part by the same academic literature that emerged in 1990s and 2000s to scrutinize its authenticity, ideology, and impact.

This scholarship ultimately typecast a variety of efforts associated with New Urbanism as firmly in the mold of the movement's prototypical work, places like Seaside or Kentlands, which sought to reproduce neo-traditional urban villages. Critical scholarly engagement with the New Urbanism has tended to retain a focus on the originators of the movement and their intentions (see Brain, 2005; Clarke, 2005; Marshall, 2003; Passel, 2013), but attention to the New Urbanism (in theory and practice) has narrowed considerably over the last decade. The most recent ‘thematic issue’ on New Urbanism to be published in a peer-reviewed journal was *Built Environment* in 2003. So, the not-so-slow creep of New Urbanism into mainstream planning and development, and the extent to which it has become what Fulton (2017) calls “ubiquitous urbanism” has largely bypassed academic currency. Indeed, existing literature narrowly

contends with the multiple and differentiated forms of New Urbanism in practice and itself reproduces the illusion of New Urbanism as a singular, coherent, albeit dubious, set of practices essentialised through an orthodox and myopic critique which persists in privileging origin over reach (i.e. application, effect, and influence). In this way, we can see how the New Urbanism critique to-date has reduced the complexity of the movement to a series of aphorisms that have largely faded into the backdrop, become “no longer a big deal” (Fulton, 2017), and easily passed on or elided as a fad in terms of academic relevance.

This thematic issue and the seven articles which comprise it seek to redress this by exploring the evolution of the movement. It asks why heterogeneous forms of the New Urbanism emerge, how the contingencies of place contribute to New Urbanism’s differentiated forms, and what ways are these multiple New Urbanisms (re)packaged as a stable and coherent set of practices that are recognizable as a common movement with widespread appeal and increasingly global reach. We seek to debate whether or not New Urbanism has indeed gone from the exceptional to the mainstream, to the extent that it is perhaps no longer distinctive, raising the question of whether or not the label has lost its relevance altogether.

2. Creeping Conformity

Fulton’s (2017) provocation that contemporary New Urbanism might be ‘dead’ was less a condemnation of the movement than it was praise and acknowledgment of the maturation of its influence, to the point of its own redundancy. The ‘urbanism’ that New Urbanism proponents champion has undeniably materialized in town centres, suburban shopping districts, and city housing projects, certainly across the USA; it is not exceptional anymore, but rather *expected*. Fulton (2017) further observes that “we don’t have to think all that much anymore about how to get urbanism to our town—it just shows up.” But how and why does it ‘show up’? The pathway or evolution from ‘radical’ and exceptional to ‘global’ and mainstream, as discursively presented through the similar accounts of the rise and proliferation of the New Urbanism in the articles in this issue, is a story of naturalization. The familiar characteristics of the New Urbanism, even its inherent but often neglected heterogeneity of forms, are however far from ‘natural,’ if by natural we can infer neutral and apolitical, but rather they are the product of the confluence of highly contextualized and deliberate political and ideological assemblages of power, influence, and capital.

Perrott (2020), in particular, challenges Fulton on this point of New Urbanism ‘showing up,’ and rightly cautions us on the risks of accepting this naturalization story unproblematically. In her re-telling of the Markham Centre case study, she demonstrates fluidly how even the notion of ‘evolution’ and change of design and plan-

ning vision and outcomes over time have been deliberately manipulated into the discursive impact and reach of New Urbanism’s political and development imprint in suburban Toronto. Grant (2020), in her commentary, similarly cautions that the domination by any particular planning and design paradigm leads inevitably to conformity (see also Harris, 2004), but with conformity need not come complacency and neglect of the attendant risks and implications of following the trend.

From Sweden, Filep and Thompson-Fawcett (2020) demonstrate how New Urbanism—in two variant forms represented by Hammarby Sjöstad and Sankt Erik—has transitioned from attempts at socially engineering intentionally ‘good’ communities to an accepted ‘building pattern’ and formal building type (i.e., compact development, walkable, well-designed public realm, etc.) that perpetuates in the absence of the movement’s deterministic social order amongst residents, and embodies a conscious effort (as seen elsewhere, see Moore, 2010; Perrott, 2020) to distance itself from it. But they point out, as do Perrott (2020) and Dierwechter (2020), that there is power and influence in the communicative role of the built form, one that reinforces the continuing relevance of New Urbanism, albeit its evolutionary and contingent rather than universalist discourse—as recognizable yet differentiated, as “acknowledged, but not over-stated” (Filep & Thompson-Fawcett, 2020, p. 414). Trudeau (2020) further suggests that the survival of the movement rests to some degree on its capacity to embrace this side of its own influence, to move beyond endorsing its own reflection via high profile and lauded exemplars, and to explore how to improve the implementation (in terms of social and environmental equality, for instance) of the rest of what ‘shows up.’

This critique of the movement’s shortcomings in implementation is echoed in Garde’s (2020) article on the past, present, and future of the movement, and within Mehaffy and Haas’ (2020) review of the movement’s founding influences and the codification of its aspirational principles into key documents, including the Charter of the New Urbanism, and more recently, the UN-Habitat’s New Urban Agenda (UN, 2016), and their limited impact on practice. The Swedish, Canadian, and American examples of New Urbanism referred to in the thematic issue demonstrate the extent to which New Urbanism reproduces recognisable, even ubiquitous, neighbourhood building types or forms, but has not delivered the social order oft-associated with the movement’s inception. As Filep and Thompson-Fawcett (2020, p. 406) observe, this is the current “holding pattern” of contemporary New Urbanism.

3. Spatial and Ideological Confluence of Governance and Advocacy

New Urbanism’s proliferation was, in part, derived via its introduction to the design and planning world as a grounded product rather than an abstract concept

or process, thus enabling its ease of mobility and its adoption and adaptation by a diverse set of governing institutions and organisations in myriad high profile development projects (Dierwechter, 2020). In his article, Dierwechter (2020) applies a neo-Weberian theory of (American) political development to argue that governing institutions that have committed themselves to the adoption and promotion of New Urbanism (e.g., Seattle; for Markham Centre see Perrott, 2020), directly and indirectly, produce spaces for the ‘reinforcement’ and ‘transformation’ of the movement. In other words, New Urbanism’s brand of principle-led ‘placemaking’ aligns with the multi-level or multi-departmental, often contentious operating orders of governing bodies, which supports consensus around the core ideas of ‘good planning’ or ‘good community’ yet provides the necessary flexibility to accommodate the particularities of context. New Urbanism thus provides the form(s) that align with the dominant political order and, as Dierwechter (2020) suggests, it is the collision of variant institutional orders in a specific place—what he refers to as intercurrency—that results in the context-dependent socio-spatial manifestations or geographies of New Urbanism, which can be scrutinized in light variations by race, ethnicity, class, gender, age, etc.

The intercurrency thesis is complimented in this issue by the application of a similar logic brought to investigate the political influence and ‘worlding’ practices (Ong, 2011) performed by powerful lobbies, campaigns, and movement-supporting organisations. Both Trudeau’s (2020) and Mehaffy and Haas’s (2020) articles demonstrate the extent to which the genealogical and discursive work of the movement’s own apparatus—such as The Congress for the New Urbanism (CNU), the Charter of the New Urbanism (CNU, 1996), and the annual CNU Charter Awards, as well as the UN-Habitat New Urban Agenda (UN, 2016)—make it easier for local contexts to commit to a New Urbanism vision, plan or flagship project, and/or to transform a plan to fit a particular, localized, political agenda. At issue, following Trudeau (2020), is the reinforcement of the singularity of the movement, of its widespread appeal, but the relative neglect of the lessons we can draw from the plurality of New Urbanisms that actually exist.

4. Future of New Urbanism

Several authors in this thematic issue point out the risks and implications of getting too comfortable with the current holding pattern or unquestioningly conforming to the expected urbanism paradigm, citing the discrepancies between intent and implementation. Grant (2020) and Garde (2020) in particular draw out the implications for housing affordability, social inclusion, public participation, environmental citizenship, and climate change. Yet, it would be an oversight not to mention here the extreme challenges facing planning and urban design practice and academe in terms of the urgency for respon-

sive governance in the wake of the Covid-19 global pandemic. Urban density, itself at the heart of the compact neighbourhood design underpinning New Urbanism, is now being challenged by public health concerns, often in the absence of due consideration of the combination of structural factors (such as race, ethnicity, income, class) that produce uneven socio-spatial patterns of infection and mortality. Whilst Perrott (2020, p. 391) in her article declares “sprawl is the past, new urbanism is legacy, and competitive urbanism is the future,” some would argue that new working, commuting, consuming, and socializing patterns in the post-Covid metropolis will reinforce suburban sprawl. But rather than the antidote, this time around New Urbanism might be conceived as a contributing factor. The ubiquity of New Urbanism has made density acceptable and expected, even in new and retrofitted suburban centres, suggesting that extended zones of ‘suburban’ flight are possible.

The future of (sub)urban development is unclear and it is equally uncertain how anxieties and prohibitions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic will filter into tomorrow’s built environment or affect the ideology or practice of normative planning movements like the New Urbanism. It is safe to assume that New Urbanism will still have a role to play in post-Covid urban planning and design. Indeed, it seems this movement may continue to be relevant to the conjuncture of crises surrounding affordable housing, racial injustice, and public health that has been laid bare by the pandemic. In this regard, New Urbanism hardly seems dead or that its history is complete. Nevertheless, as we move toward a post-Covid world, it is unclear whether its prescribed approaches to planning and design will continue to be expected or even accepted. In such a moment, it will be vital to trace and scrutinize how and why New Urbanism ‘shows up’ and the different ways in which it takes shape. Toward that end, the articles in this thematic issue offer vital food for thought, innovative frameworks, and new perspectives that help us to make sense of the next chapters of New Urbanism’s evolution.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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About the Authors



Susan Moore is Associate Professor of Urban Development and Planning at The Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, London, UK, where she focuses on relational geographies of urban and suburban development. She has written extensively on the New Urbanism and other urban development and governance models and the formation and circulation of so-called best practices, and more recently on social media platforms role in local urban change and community governance.



Dan Trudeau is a Professor of Geography at Macalester College in St Paul, MN, USA, where he focuses on the roles of city planning and public policy in shaping urban development. His work explores the interactions between the built environment and social inequality and focuses on efforts to promote more just, equitable, and inclusive cities. Dan’s work examines cities in North America and operates at the intersection of a number of disciplines and specializes in qualitative research.